

blue lips by demoncat22

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Summary:

Stephanie is still a mother of five, Billie is still infuriating.

OR

A classic retelling.

blue lips

Author's Note:

*heavy steve/nancy in the first chapter.

The very first time Stephanie found something like happiness, she'd crowded Nathan Wheeler against the cracked walls of the boys' bathroom.

Hunched shoulders and tucked shirts, that had been the first, and not the last time Nathan's quiet laugh made Stephanie's heart trip all over herself, no.

Stephanie remembers the last time.

Tuesday.

Tommi had been recreating a grostegue little trick she and Carl had discovered, a hand splayed over his chest, in what Stephanie could only assume to be a complement to the hand he most definitely had on her ass. Half a second later, Carl was shouting at Tommi and Tommi's polished nails made red lines around Carl's bulging bicep, and Stephanie, in the wake of all this, had been absurdly grateful to have Nathan sitting quiet beside her, his arm resting snug around her waist.

She'd turned to Nathan, maybe she would have asked to leave. The little details are lost to her now, but she remembers the very moment her heart did a different sort of dance.

Nathan had been staring off at Jo Byer.

Jo'd just lost her sister then, and Stephanie hadn't spared it half a thought. Kids went missing all the time, she certainly remembered running around in dirty skirts herself, came back alright with nothing but scrapes and bruises. Nathan had never been convinced. Looking at Jo, she could never quite believe it herself- her cheeks hollowed out, the bags under her eyes worse than Stephanie had ever seen.

It will be a selfish, embarrassing thing to admit later on, but

privately, all she'd cared was that *that* had been the last time she'd looked at Nathan and felt something like happiness.

The town is different that fall, an early Winter wind blowing into the neighbourhood. Nathan becomes the sort of distant Stephanie had seen her mother become, with the disappearance of his best friend, right in her backyard. She has to, for once in her life, give him space. It isn't a joke, isn't half-hearted- and she's not good at that.

Must be why Nathan leaves her for Jo without really leaving her for Jo.

She didn't know until she followed Nathan looking for answers, ready to claw quiet Jo Byer's eyes out, that Hawkins is filled with lurking monsters.

Jealousy becomes violence becomes regret becomes exhaustion.

There's just no room for it anymore, in the following months of radio silence, of locked doors and nail-ridden bats. Stephanie curls around Nathan throughout Winter, holds him tightly because he's all she has left. Weary contentment burns at the edges of her skin, and, in staring at her ceiling at four in the morning, her bed an expanse of cold air, she realises she's out of places to look. Not that she's been living her life in the sleepy town of Hawkins, Indiana, chasing the fleeting feeling of Something Like Happiness.

The beginning of spring marks the end of her reign, all good and proper like.

Tommi hasn't dropped by her place, not even after the water thaws to make a mess of her pool. Catherine's called a few times after a party that will never come, and one final time to tell her Nathan changed her.

Funny that.

Nathan is predictable and reliable and he's *enough*.

Come morning, she still walks down the corridors in new ballet flats,

she still plays with the crisply ironed collar of her blouse as she accosts Nathan at his locker. She still replaces the bottles of hairspray in her purse with a new one, and carries a spare lipstick in the folds of her polo sweater, but Stephanie Harrington isn't queen of Hawkins High anymore.

There's a void to fill.

Empty things aren't empty for long.

She hears about Billie Hargrove before she meets her. Sees her on the first day, in that loud, terrible ride, but that's nothing like a meeting. Blond haired, blue eyed, with a throaty laugh and full hips. Stephanie knows little about California girls but what she hears from her mother, and Hargrove fits the image she has in her head like a glove. The school is small and vicious, but the people are easy to avoid when you've fallen out of favour.

She wouldn't have sought Hargrove out, but at Tim's Halloween Bash, Tommi, with her new entourage, brings Hargrove to her.

Some time between tucking her sunglasses into her collar, and Cat shouting, "*Eat it, Harrington,*", Nathan disappears.

When talking about Billie Hargrove, no one had mentioned the lack of a shirt, or a dress, or any sort of sweater- the first time Stephanie Harrington meets the infamous new queen of Hawkins, Billie is in nothing but tattered jeans and a leather jacket, proudly unzipped to reveal smooth skin and a glaring red bra. It's difficult looking her in the eye like that. No one had mentioned the *lack of boundaries*, because it takes half a second for Hargrove to get in her face, and Stephanie regrets taking her sunglasses off.

"Took you long enough to show your face."

Above the roar of the party, it takes Stephanie a while. Hargrove's voice hits her after a loaded moment. Her voice is a deliberate rasp, husky to the point of being *ridiculous*. Standing with her hip cocked, body slanted to the left, there is mean humour in the curve of her lips, a spark of ruin in her eyes Stephanie is well versed in, and she thinks, *fuck*.

She thinks, *I don't need this right now.*

She hadn't given a shit about the throne in months, but she still straightens against the wall when Hargrove tosses out the word, "Scared?" like a challenge. When the gaggle of people jeer and lean in, she tears her eyes away from Tommi's half manic smile, says, "Not really." like she's unflappable.

Hargrove's lips split into a grin, her cigarette clenched between her teeth.

She chuckles but still she backs off, a loose swagger in her step that's half alcohol. She backs off, lets everyone know it's her idea, her hair, wild and matted, falling over her eyes. "It's still early." She laughs, slinging an arm around Tommi.

It's a short conversation.

Stephanie doesn't wait for her to disappear into a wake of screaming freshmen before leaving herself, unhooking her glasses from her collar.

She looks for Nathan instead.

He's been an unusual sort of quiet ever since they left the Hollands, the sort of quiet only talk of Bart will bring about. It had been a bad idea to her when he'd proposed it, it looks like a worse idea now, but Bart is a blurry image Stephanie doesn't touch on. He'd been a curly-haired stranger standing beside Nathan, laughing beside Nathan, gone when he'd turned around, turned around for *her*. Too stuffy to be any fun.

Still, Bart loved Nathan.

So, Stephanie leaves Nathan to his own because she knows now - space is important, there are some things she will not understand. This is one of them. She leaves him- *a mistake*.

By the end of the night, his cheeks are a ruddy red, his eyes are liquid steel under the lights.

By the end of the night, there is a burning in her eyes that match the

burn of her throat.

Nathan hovers outside the dance hall the next day, his arms crossed over his chest. She can't help gritting her teeth to keep the flush from reaching her cheeks, embarrassment burning through her practice clothes. It feels as if he wants to flaunt the cracks in their- whatever they have right now, in front of her entire dance group, in front of her coach, in front of-

Hargrove's smile is as sharp as the gleam of her eyes.

In his beige jumper, Nathan looks as sweet as a marshmallow, despite the furrow of his brows. A grimace on his lips, he drags her away from her practice to ask for an explanation he shouldn't *need*.

"I think *you're* bullshit." she says into the silence, nothing of her fury in her voice. She leaves him in the alley, and thinks about it the entire way home.

Day turns to night.

White light runs down her hallway, visible in the space under her bedroom door. Everything else in her room glows orange in the nightlight she'd taken from her father's study, large shadows cutting her bed in half, cutting her wall in half. The red dots of her watch count the hours she's wasting, resting sideways on her table. Night reminds her that her bed is hollow and cold, that her parents are in New York, that she doesn't have the best track record of being right.

She presses the heels of her palms against her eyes.

She might have fucked up.